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Adult Learning Theories Closure

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June 12, 2011

Abstract

A student-centered nontraditional learning program was proposed to better prepare fire department military personnel in obtaining their 911 dispatch certification at a Florida military installation. Maintaining an adequate number of dispatched qualified military personnel, in addition to current civilian dispatchers at the same location, improves the educational qualifications of the department during any emergencies. Various adult learning theories support how dispatch instructors teach their students. Research was conducted through the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Google Scholar website, and 13 articles were retrieved. A literature review determined their application in the subject material. Research revealed that the nontraditional learning program was supported by numerous adult theories.

Adult Learning Theories Closure

The dispatch center at a Florida military installation, which is composed of civilians, including Baskas (personal communication, June 11, 2011), is responsible for training their own active duty firefighters to become dispatchers. This training ensures that an adequate number of certified dispatchers can be met in case civilian dispatchers, including Baskas, (personal communication, June 11, 2011) need to evacuate the installation due to an emergency. When active duty firefighters are assigned to the dispatch center by their supervisors for training, whether or not these firefighters have dispatch experience, the firefighter's dispatch training is unknown to dispatch instructors unless these instructors assess the extent of the firefighters' training. If these firefighters, including Baskas (personal communication, June 11, 2011), did receive dispatch training before being assigned to the dispatch center, they would have been trained while serving active duty at various military installations or on a temporary duty assignment. Traditionally, dispatchers, including Baskas (personal communication, June 11, 2011), have used the teacher-centered teaching method where firefighters were assumed not to have any prior dispatch experience. This method has always resulted in longer, exhausting training sessions for instructors. To counter these effects, while promoting best teaching practices, dispatchers should consider using student-centered teaching. Dispatchers would assess what dispatch training firefighters possess in order to determine the amount of additional training that would be required to certify firefighters as dispatchers.

Initial Preparation

As the previously mentioned dispatch center in Florida is always staffed by one dispatcher at any given time, it is important to prepare students to be as self-sufficient as possible. The purpose of the dispatch training program is to deter dispatchers from using

traditional teaching and allow firefighters to work as much on their own, in the presence of experienced dispatchers, in order to understand how all the training components work together.

Since a majority of Corley's (2008) suggestions of self-directed learning correlate to the dispatch training program, dispatchers can apply these strategies to maximize effective training: (1) dispatchers would learn firefighter's current training and understand where the starting point is in which to begin training, (2) dispatchers would match the appropriate resources (computers, phones, and radios for the dispatch center) and the methods (face-to-face communication between dispatcher and airmen, and communications from radios, phones, and computers) necessary to the learning goal (using student-centered teaching for teaching dispatching), (3) dispatchers would stress a positive attitude and an independence when dealing with customers on the phone as needs will constantly be addressed, and (4) dispatchers should encourage and support students throughout the learning process by providing continuous feedback. With these proposed training objectives, dispatchers can then conduct an initial assessment of students' dispatch training.

Initial Assessment

When firefighters are assigned for dispatch training, their training background is unknown. Dispatchers should complete a verbal assessment that would determine what training firefighters have, and if they are capable of conducting themselves accordingly in the dispatch center.

Constructivism

Firefighters who have served at least four years active duty most likely have accumulated a vast amount of training and education. As it is critical to qualify firefighters in the least amount of time to increase the number of qualified personnel when the need arises, it would be necessary dispatchers to assess firefighters' background before training begins to

determine the amount of training that would remain. When firefighters use their education and experience in dispatch training, they understand the infrastructure and operations of the dispatch center. Having developed this frame of mind, they “encompass the way they frame and shape their worlds” (Kinsella, 2006, p. 282) by which they receive and disseminate information during training. Dispatchers do not know the extent of firefighters’ background or knowledge until they begin training and work with training resources.

Self-directed Learning

Once firefighters’ prior training and education have been established, they would begin training as self-directed learners where they solve problems using resources available to them. Training firefighters as dispatchers refers to two of three definitions of self-directed learning (Baumgartner, 2003). The first definition deals with the goals of self-directed learning: (1) to augment adult learners as self-directed learners, (2) to promote transformational learning, and (3) to promote emancipatory learning and social action (Baumgartner, 2000) (as cited by Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). The second definition deals with a process where “people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 305) (as cited by Baumgartner, 2000). The process by which firefighters learn dispatching can be demonstrated by two models of self-directed learning, sequential and interwoven

Sequential Model. Dispatchers should use Tough’s Sequential Model of Self-directed Learning (Baumgartner, 2003) (as cited by Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Danis, 1999; Spear, 1988) as firefighters would find the “what to learn, where to learn, and how to learn” (Baumgartner, 2003, p. 26) of self-directed learning. They should determine what is needed to learn dispatching (phones, radios, computers, and manuals), where the skills are learned (current

occupation as firefighters being trained as dispatchers and from overseas assignments), and what it takes to get the training done (dedication, respecting instructors, and constant training).

Interwoven Model. Sometime after the initial training has begun, training becomes more complicated when dispatchers use Brockett and Hiemstra's (1991) interwoven model (as cited by Baumgartner, 2000); it contains five components (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Danis, 1999; Spear, 1988) (as cited by Baumgartner, 2003). In the first component, firefighters should take full responsibility of their learning, which explains why they qualify at different rates. Secondly, their training centers on the "activities of planning, implementing, and evaluating learning" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 28) (as cited by Baumgartner, 2003). In the third part of the model, they are "predisposed toward taking primary responsibility for personal learning endeavors" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 29) (as cited by Baumgartner, 2003). In the fourth component, firefighter's self-directed learning occurs when their need for self-direction is matched with the opportunity for self-directed learning. Finally, they exist in a social context that affects the learning process and the learner. In addition to their education and training, it is vital that this is complimented and enhanced by additional resources that exist in the dispatch office.

Resources

Dispatch training encompasses not only receiving emergency information and dispatching appropriate personnel, but also includes locating and working with the necessary resources (computers, phones, and manuals) in order to solve problems. One of the major concerns when working with resources is when resources malfunction. Not only would firefighters need to know how to use the resources available in the dispatch center, but there are occasions where they would have to expect the unexpected, where there would be equipment malfunctions. Yanow and Tsoukas (2009) call these malfunctions, backtalk. During normal

operations, a reflection-in-action (reflection taking place at the moment, e.g., trying to locate an address on the computer) will be interrupted (computer system will crash) where equipment will lead the dispatcher to improvise a reaction or response (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, pp. 1340-1341). As firefighters work with their instructors and eventually become more competent in their training, they will be assessed on occasion as to how they can handle emergency operations.

Assessments

When firefighters are assigned to dispatch training, they bring with them their own distinct intelligence. Each learner's intelligence profile consists of a combination of strengths and weaknesses (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006). It is this difference in strengths and weaknesses that will be tested to determine how they will cope with the daily functions of the dispatch center. When instructors assess their student's training after each scenario, instructors should reflect upon their student's performance to determine to what degree the accumulated training has taken towards becoming certified.

Multiple Intelligence

Every student possesses varying levels of intelligence. Instructors should recognize this and, therefore, provide a variety of learning experiences for their students (McClellan & Conti, 2008). Gardner (1993) (as cited by McClellan & Conti, 2008) argues that humans possess a number of distinct intelligences beyond verbal and logical abilities in different skills and abilities. During the course of their training, firefighters will have learned how to receive emergency information, how to disseminate information, and how to dispatch the required agencies to emergencies. Dispatch training requires engaging the auditory (acknowledging alarms, phones ringing and interpersonal communication), kinesthetic (moving between computers and phones), and visual (acknowledging colors on computers, people and visitors in

the office, and phone lines to answer) capabilities in order to process emergency information (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) (as cited by Savitz, 1999). Along with incorporating varying intelligences into training, firefighters and their instructors must reflect to determine further training requirements.

Reflection

To assess an airmen's current level of training, instructors should provide multiple scenarios allowing their students to use all necessary resources to solve problems and reflect upon their actions. Instructors should begin training with a simple emergency simulation to determine any deficiencies in training that may require attention. Firefighters are supervised as they process a simulated emergency as they explain to the instructor what they are doing. At the end of the scenario, the instructor and trainee will reflect upon what actions took place and if any corrections need to be taken. Bandura (2006) explained that reflecting upon one's own behavior is vital as human functioning is "a product of a reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioral, and environmental determinants" (p. 165).

Conclusion

It is vital that proper training be established to ensure that military personnel are dispatch qualified in case of an emergency. Instructors should use nontraditional teaching methods to make initial preparations by assessing training and education backgrounds of their trainees to increase certification time and decrease dispatcher fatigue. Initial assessments include using what training and education firefighters may have in preparing them to become self-sufficient in the dispatch center. Self-directed learning prepares these students to utilize as many resources as possible to solve problems. As military personnel possess varying multiple intelligence, instructors should provide scenarios to allow them to solve problems and to determine the degree

of additional training required. At the conclusion of each scenario, reflections should determine if any additional training is required before certification is granted.

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